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Success for Graduation and Beyond: College Counseling Advocacy Skills That Target the Needs of First-Generation College Students

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Success for Graduation and Beyond: College Counseling Advocacy Skills That Target the

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Abstract

The writer explores how the role of a college counselor can support and advocate for first-generation students in a way that can lead to attainable success beyond merely graduating from an institution. Research has shown that college faculty have been proven to be a significant source of aspirational, intellectual, and emotional support in a student's college success. The role of a college counselor could be an ideal mentor and advocate for those students who may be at a disadvantage, such as a first-generation student. The specific barriers that first-generation students experience that differ from continuing-generation students are discussed. Additionally, the role of the college counselor is examined, and potential areas of advocacy efforts are discussed. Finally, the ACA advocacy competencies of students/clients are examined and key factors relevant to the college counselor and client relationship are identified.

Keywords: First-generation student, barriers, disadvantages, resiliency, college counselor, advocacy

Contents

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First-generation students (FGS) (neither of the student's parents has a four-year degree) often come to college with barriers that continuing-generation students (CGS) (at least one parent has a four-year degree) do not encounter. These disadvantages, such as adjustment issues, limited resources, or limited knowledge of resources on campus, may be unknown to a first-generation student (Amirkhan et al., 2022). These disadvantages are more likely to lead to worse academic grades, and more stress and health disparities than CGS (Amirkhan et al., 2022). Studies have shown that college faculty have been proven to be a significant source of aspirational, intellectual, and emotional support in a student's college success (McCallen & Johnson, 2020). The role of a college counselor could be an ideal mentor and advocate for those students who may be at a disadvantage in their college experience (Martinez, 2021). Furthermore, advocacy skills can be implemented in counseling to help support first-generation students and help fill in the gaps (Lewis et al., 2003). These advocacy skills could lead to success for graduation and beyond (Lewis et al., 2003).

Review of Literature

The Problem: Barriers First-Generation Students Encounter

An extensive amount of research has found that FGS have substantial disadvantages setting them behind their peers (Goldman et al., 2021). It is important to remember that FGS come from diverse social, economic, and cultural backgrounds (Goldman et al., 2021). Goldman et al. (2021) also highlight the fact that FGS face unique challenges, even before the start of college. These transitioning obstacles include lower college readiness, lower ACT/SAT scores, less family support, and lower socioeconomic status (SES) compared to their continuing-

generation peers (Goldman et al., 2021). These disadvantages can negatively affect their academic progress (Goldman et al., 2021). In addition to these challenges, there are unique emotional barriers to overcome for success in college (Goldman et al., 2021).

Goldman et al. (2021) suggest that FGS experience more negative emotions and less positive emotions than their continuing-generation peers. They conducted a study to explore the relationship of academic emotions of FGS and how this relates to their engagement in transformative experiences (TE, i.e., transformation of the way students see and experience the world because of learning school content) (Goldman et al., 2021). The negative emotions studied include shame, hopelessness, anger, and disappointment (Goldman et al., 2021). The positive emotions include hope, happiness, and inspiration (Goldman et al., 2021). The data was collected from undergraduate FGS and CGS students in introductory psychology courses (N=506) (Goldman et al., 2021). The results from this study suggest that intrinsic, utility, and achievement values positively predicted engagement in TE of FGS and CGS (Goldman et al., 2021). They also found that FGS experienced significantly more negative emotions than their CGS peers (Goldman et al., 2021). These reported negative emotions can act as barriers to engagement which may lead to a decrease in academic achievement (Goldman et al., 2021). This study also found that although FGS report experiencing more negative emotions than CGS, there was no significant difference in their positive emotions (Goldman et al., 2021). This may indicate that the negative emotions experienced by FGS may not be detrimental enough to negatively impact their positive emotions related to higher education (Goldman et al., 2021). Ultimately, this could mean that a FGS's academic resiliency may help protect the positive feelings towards an educational experience, as demonstrated by the similar levels of utility and attainment values found in this study (Goldman et al., 2021).

Phillips et al. (2020) suggest that FGS often face an initial cultural mismatch early on in their college environment. This means that a student's cultural ideals do not necessarily match up with the cultural environment of their college (Phillips et al., 2020). Many US higher education systems prioritize independence as the cultural ideal, as opposed to an interdependent educational style (Phillips et al., 2020). This cultural mismatch can lead to performing less well academically than CGS (Phillips et al., 2020). To test this hypothesis, this study used a cross-sectional and longitudinal approach (Phillips et al., 2020). The cross-sectional design portion of the study was to investigate whether FGS at the end of college are similar to FGS at the beginning of college, or if they have shifted toward the cultural norms of their CGS peers (Phillips et al., 2020). The method included recruiting first year and fourth year students from competitive catholic liberal arts colleges in the Midwest to take a 15-minute survey in exchange for a $5 gift card, and a gift pen (Phillips et al., 2020). A total of 309 participants were used for the data in this study (Phillips et al., 2020). It was found that FGS were significantly more likely to endorse interdependent motives than CGS (Phillips et al., 2020). They found no significant effect on the students' year in college, indicating consistent endorsement of interdependent motives across students in the first or fourth year of college (Phillips et al., 2020).

The longitudinal design of the study investigates whether FGS stay the same or shift toward middle- and upper- class cultural norms as they persist in the college environment over time (Phillips et al., 2020). For this, the study first tracks the same cohort of students from entry into college (Time 1; N=1,372) to graduation four years later (Time 2; N=265) (Phillips et al., 2020). They then recruit participants from a different university to consider whether findings from the cross-sectional study could be replicated (Phillips et al., 2020). Thirdly, they explore both relatively objective (academic performance) and subjective (social status) outcomes

(Phillips et al., 2020). Finally, they test the students' subjective sense of fit as a factor that may fuel the effects of initial cultural mismatch (Phillips et al., 2020).

The longitudinal portion of this study finds similar results to the cross-sectional study which is that FGS endorse more interdependent motives than do CGS (Phillips et al., 2020). The cross-sectional and longitudinal approaches find that cultural mismatch is associated with psychological and academic costs that persist until graduation (Phillips et al., 2020). They first find that at entry, there are social class differences in cultural norms for FGS (Phillips et al., 2020). They find that FGS endorse more interdependent cultural norms than their CGS peers (Phillips et al., 2020). Secondly, they find that endorsing interdependence at college entry predicts reduced subjective sense of fit in college four years later (Phillips et al., 2020). Thirdly, they find that lower subjective sense of fit predicts a lower grade point average and subjective social status upon graduation (Phillips et al., 2020). Overall, these results suggest that initial cultural mismatch contributes to worse experiences and academic outcomes among FGS, and that these disparities persist upon graduation (Phillips et al., 2020). This study suggests that providing access is not sufficient to reduce inequality, and that colleges need to create more inclusive environments to ensure that students from diverse backgrounds, including first-generation students, can reap similar rewards (Phillips et al., 2020).

Studies have shown that for many low-income Latinx and Asian first-generation students, family is a central motivator for obtaining a college degree (Covarrubias et al., 2021). Striving for this upward mobility and success may lead to unanticipated consequences (Covarrubias et al., 2021). This study highlights the concept of *family achievement guilt*, or the guilt that some FGS experience for "leaving family" behind to attend college (Covarrubias et al., 2021, p. 696). The feeling of guilt is related to higher depressive symptoms, lower self-esteem, and poorer

concentration in school (Covarrubias et al., 2021). There is also the feeling that the opportunity to attend college grants the individual privileges that family members back home do not have access to (Covarrubias et al., 2021). These socioemotional conflicts directly relate to mental health, which may affect success achieved in college (Covarrubias et al., 2021).

To gain insight of how family achievement guilt impacts Latinx and Asian FGS, this study utilized in-depth interviews with 34 low-income Latinx and Asian FGS (Covarrubias et al., 2021). They were recruited at a university in California where the cost of living is high (Covarrubias et al., 2021). The researchers used both inductive and deductive analytical methods to construct four themes of guilt (Covarrubias et al., 2021). The four themes include leaving family obligations behind, having more privileges, becoming different, and experiencing financial distress (Covarrubias et al., 2021). Latinx and Asian FGS expressed similar feelings of family achievement guilt for attending college (Covarrubias et al., 2021). It was found that unpacking family achievement guilt experiences can contribute to better understanding of this phenomena, and can aid possible support mechanisms (Covarrubias et al., 2021).

Research has proven that there are significant barriers such as stress overload that affect FGS in relation to their CGS peers (Amirkhan et al., 2022). Stress has already been found to predict poor grades and illness in college student populations (Amirkhan et al., 2022). One recent study hypothesized that stress overload would be more prevalent among FGS which would in turn explain their academic and health disparities (Amirkhan et al., 2022). To test this hypothesis, this study recruited 593 FGS and CGS public university students to complete an anonymous online survey assessing stress overload, somatic symptoms, and grades (Amirkhan et al., 2022). The analyses of variance showed that FGS (N=366) reported more stress overload than CGS (N=227) peers (Amirkhan et al., 2022). It was also found that FGS reported lower

grades, and marginally more somatic symptoms (Amirkhan et al., 2022). They found that stress overload was a common denominator for their FGS participants, which could offer an explanation to their academic performance, and mental and physical health issues (Amirkhan et al., 2022). The study finally suggests the utility of stress overload screening tools as a primary focus for therapeutic interventions with first-generation students (Amirkhan et al., 2022).

Clearly, there are systemic and institutional issues when FGS are proven to be at a disadvantage in comparison to CGS when earning a four-year degree (LaForce, 2021). There are also mental health disparities that may jeopardize the success achieved in college and the likelihood of graduating with a four-year degree. These findings demonstrate the urgency to mitigate these differences and fill in the gaps in higher education for its FGS.

The Causes

FGS make up one-third of the United States national collegiate student body, yet they are only half as likely to graduate compared to CGS (Amirkhan et al., 2022). The motivation to attend college and graduate exists for many FGS, but once on campus, they begin to face unique struggles (Amirkhan et al., 2022). Many FGS are also of minority and working-class backgrounds (Amirkhan et al., 2022). They are likely to have an interdependent or collectivistic family system, and in a college environment, must adjust to an individualistic and competitive culture (Amirkhan et al., 2022). FGS also have additional demands, including job and family responsibilities more so than their CGS peers (Amirkhan et al., 2022). Studies have found that FGS are more likely to have a job, not only to support themselves through school, but also to contribute to their families back home (Amirkhan et al., 2022). They may also experience discrimination, exclusion, and devaluation from a middle-class oriented college setting (Amirkhan et al., 2022).

Resources to counter the additional demand also lack in many college settings (Amirkhan et al., 2022). FGS are typically less likely to have financial support from family members and are less likely to take out more financial aid for fear of debt (Amirkhan et al., 2022). They are also more likely to lack a car for transportation and extra money for additional course material (Amirkhan et al., 2022). Less tangible resources include missing information about college procedures because their parents cannot guide them, and less likelihood of having knowledge of on-campus services (Amirkhan et al., 2022).

FGS often lack emotional support on campus (Amirkhan et al., 2022). This may be due to a lack of social networks (Amirkhan et al., 2022). It may also be that other university professionals may not be able to relate to FGS experiences (Amirkhan et al., 2022). This can lead the students to feel psychologically alienated from the university (Amirkhan et al., 2022). In sum, research has proven the many challenges faced by FGS, including struggles with adjustment to college life, poorer mental and physical health, resource deficits, and emotional alienation from others (Amirkhan et al., 2022).

Many FGS who also belong to a minoritized population and are low-income students may experience guilt related to familial obligation while being away in college (Covarrubias et al., 2021). The concept of familial obligations is a psychological sense that one should help contribute to their family (Covarrubias et al., 2021). This stems from the cultural importance of family, which is true for low-income, minority communities, and those who come from immigrant backgrounds (Covarrubias et al., 2021). It is common to support family by providing concrete assistance to family members such as sibling caretaking, translating for parents, and financial assistance (Covarrubias et al., 2021). These obligations become complicated when these students leave the family to study in a college setting that is culturally different from their

home environment (Covarrubias et al., 2021). Many FGS report still engaging in extensive

family roles while also navigating new and rigorous college demands (Covarrubias et al., 2021).

This leads to reports of experiencing guilt and stress for prioritizing one over the other

(Covarrubias et al., 2021). This study indicates that there is still a gap in the literature detailing

the different ways that these students experience guilt and how it may affect their college success

(Covarrubias et al., 2021). While Goldman et al. (2021) suggest that resiliency may be a

protective factor for FGS's TE and positive emotions towards education, further research is

needed to gain better insight on how it relates to FGS's feelings of family achievement guilt.

What is Being Done for First-Generation Students and College Success

One source that draws from a 5-year mixed methods study of the Thompson Scholar

Learning Community (TSLC), discusses how higher education faces the challenge of how to

increase the success of FGS, low-income, and racially minoritized students (Kezar et al., 2022).

The study design included quantitative data including longitudinal surveys and institutional

transcript data as well as qualitative case study data that included program observation and

longitudinal interviews with 83 students over the course of 3 years (Kezar et al., 2022). An

interpretive case study design was used because this allowed this study to use multiple data

sources and types to understand the research around how college faculty create a supportive

culture on campus (Kezar et al., 2022). This study reports equity gaps in the completion rates for

FGS versus their CGS counterparts (Kezar et al., 2022).

The study conducted by Kezar et al. (2022) study highlights how many universities have

tried various interventions such as student mentoring programs, cultural centers, supplemental

instruction, etc. Little progress has been reported in improving the success and completion rates

of first-generation students (Kezar et al., 2022). Kezar et al. (2022) suggest a cultural shift on

campus to support diverse students' success. They suggest a more holistic approach that is proactive, strengths-oriented, identity-conscious, and collaborative (Kezar et al., 2022). The goal for this holistic campus cultural shift is for FGS to experience college success (Kezar et al., 2022).

Kezar et al. (2022) summarizes Museus's (2014) proposed Culturally Engaging Campus Environment (CECE) model that focuses on supporting students from diverse backgrounds, including FGS. The CECE (2014) model includes nine elements:

1. Cultural familiarity among faculty and staff who share their common backgrounds.

2. Culturally relevant knowledge that provides an opportunity to learn about their own racial cultures.

3. Cultural community service where students give back to the communities they came from.

4. Opportunities for meaningful cross-cultural engagement.

5. A collectivist orientation where individual achievement is downplayed and group work supported.

6. Culturally validating environments in which their backgrounds and communities are noted to be worthy.

7. A humanizing education environment where care is communicated by faculty and staff to students.

8. A proactive philosophy where faculty and staff take responsibility to reach out to students.

9. Holistic support in which students receive both academic and interpersonal support and for which faculty or staff help them to identify such support.

The CECE was created from elements that have been empirically documented to support the success of diverse student populations (Kezar et al., 2022). It has also been demonstrated that campus cultures that reflect the nine elements of the CECE model, have students report more positive perceptions and an improved sense of belonging on campus (Kezar et al., 2022).

Another intervention suggested in the literature is transformative experiences (TE) theory. It is a theory that stems from a motivational perspective focused on the interaction between in-school learning and out-of-school experience (Goldman et al., 2021). This can help the student find meaning and immediate utility of the knowledge being gained in college (Goldman et al., 2021). TE has been linked to positive outcomes such as deep-level learning and interest (Goldman et al., 2021). TE can also be broken down into three components: motivated use, expansion of perception, and experimental value (Goldman et al., 2021). The motivated use refers to the application of course content into context where the application is not required (Goldman et al., 2021). This focuses on the individual's application and understanding of the content outside of the classroom (Goldman et al., 2021). The expansion of perception refers to how one's perception or existing schemas have been altered in consequence by a concept or idea (Goldman et al., 2021). This allows a student to see everyday objects and events through the lens of their course material (Goldman et al., 2021). The final component is experiential value, which refers to the value of the content for the experience it provides (Goldman et al., 2021). These are the three crucial components of TE that lead to its successful use (Goldman et al., 2021). Goldman et al. (2021) have suggested using TE with FGS so students can apply school content to their everyday lives in a way that is valuable to them.

One study suggests that FGS have different academic help-seeking behaviors than CGS (Payne et al., 2021). This study indicates that FGS are less likely to seek out help in traditional

ways such as attending office hours, tutoring services, and other campus resources (Payne et al.,

2021). This study highlights the fact that there is a lack in literature investigating (a) what FGS

do when they need academic help and (b) how FGS navigate those resources (Payne et al.,

2021). To answer these questions, this study used a strengths-based approach, six focus groups

and one in-depth interview (Payne et al., 2021). The transcripts were then analyzed using a

thematic analysis (Payne et al., 2021). The participants (N=17) were recruited from a primarily

white institution in the southwestern United States (Payne et al., 2021).

This study found four major themes which include: navigating resources and decision-

making, peers as capital and as a cost, role of identity in learning environments, and professors

as a resource and a threat (Payne et al., 2021). Navigating resources and decision-making

describes the help-seeking process of each participant (Payne et al., 2021). The participants said

that they were aware of multiple resources, however, the decision of where to seek help was

nuanced and context specific, leading the individual to decide whether they would engage in

formal or informal help-seeking (Payne et al., 2021). They then would further weigh the options

of using themselves as a source (self-reliance) or seeking help from resources on campus (Payne

et al., 2021). Using peers as capital and as a cost refers to the role peers play in expediting or

inhibiting the help-seeking process (Payne et al., 2021). Participants indicated that asking a

professor for help could be a daunting experience, and so asking a peer for help was a more

relaxed approach (Payne et al., 2021). Identity supportive vs. threating environments refers to

feelings of relatedness or connectedness to others which can bolster help-seeking behaviors

(Payne et al., 2021). The participants shared multiple factors that influenced relatedness such as

racial/ethnic identity, FGS identity, gender identity, and the classroom environment created by

the professors and peers (Payne et al., 2021). The final theme is the perception of professors, or

how a student views their professor (Payne et al., 2021). This seemed to be one of the most

significant determinants of including their professors in their help-seeking process (Payne et al.,

2021). One-third of the participants in this study indicated a negative experience with a professor

which deterred them from seeking help from them (Payne et al., 2021). The students also

wondered if there was value in seeking help from professors (Payne et al., 2021). The study says

that when students did choose to seek help from their professors, it was because they perceived

efficiency and usefulness from doing so (Payne et al., 2021). Overall, their findings suggest that

FGS actively use their networks to decide where to seek help, assess the quality of help, assess

the risks involved in asking for help, and take corrective measures in their help-seeking strategies

when needed (Payne et al., 2021).

The College Counselor and Advocacy Competencies

The American Counseling Association (ACA) promotes the of duty for counselors to

advocate for their clients. Counselors are encouraged to address potential systemic barriers and

obstacles that limit the access and development of clients (ACA, 2014). Specifically, the *ACA*

Code of Ethics (2014) states in section A.7.a, *Advocacy*, that "when appropriate, counselors

advocate at an individual, group, institutional, and societal levels to address potential barriers and

obstacles that inhibit access and/or the growth and development of clients" (p. 5). Many college

counselors embrace the idea of advocating for their clients, and the ACA ethical code helps give

counselors a guideline to do so (ACA, 2014).

The ACA also promotes advocacy competencies that are critical to the counseling

profession. The *Advocacy Competency Domains* have three dimensions of competency, but the

client/student dimension will be the focus of discussion (Lewis et al., 2003). An advocacy-

oriented college counselor would recognize the impact of systemic barriers that their clients

encounter. They would also recognize the impact of social, political, economic, and cultural factors that affect the client (Lewis et al., 2003). At the client/student level, the college counselor would implement empowerment strategies in direct counseling (Lewis et al., 2003). This would help the client recognize and understand systemic challenges as well as social, economic, and cultural factors for themselves. This type of intervention can help start the groundwork for self-advocacy and empowerment (Lewis et al., 2003). Other direct interventions include identifying strengths and resources, recognizing the signs that indicate that an individual's behaviors reflect a response to systemic or internalized oppressions, and identify external barriers that affect the client's development (Lewis et al., 2003). The college counselor can also train clients in self-advocacy skills and action plans, and then assist clients in carrying out action plans (Lewis et al., 2003).

College counselors may also advocate for their clients outside of the counseling session. The advocate counselor can help develop environmental interventions on behalf of clients to identify relevant services, education systems, and other resources (Lewis et al., 2003). They can also help their client identify barriers to their well-being, and then help them gain access to needed resources (Lewis et al., 2003). Counselors can also develop initial plans of action to confront barriers, as well as potential allies that may help in this process (Lewis et al., 2003). Finally, the advocate conscious counselor can help clients carry out their plans of action (Lewis et al., 2003).

According to a recent study focused on supporting FGS, having knowledge about FGS, and staying educated about the barriers that FGS face is a good place to start for counselors who work with this population (Martinez, 2021). This same study suggests that mental health professionals who work in university settings should implement empowerment strategies with

FGS (Martinez, 2021). College counselors should be mindful about these various factors specific

to FGS. A college counselor can use their training to radically advocate for first-generation

students and use their advocacy skills to help empower students.

Discussion

There is sufficient literature indicating that there are significant disadvantages between FGS and their CGS counterparts. FGS face unique challenges before even starting college, which can include lower ACT/SAT scores, less family support, and lower SES (Goldman et al., 2021). Other common barriers include adjustment issues, minimal preparedness for college and campus resources, more negative emotions, and other mental health disparities. Family achievement guilt, or the guilt of leaving the family behind, is also a psychological conflict that many first-generation students experience and must navigate (Payne et al., 2021). All these factors lead to stress overload which in turn can lead to worse academic performance, poor mental health, taking longer to complete their academic program, or dropping out of college altogether at a greater rate than their peers who are CGS (Phillips et al., 2020).

Research also indicates that college faculty can play a crucial role for FGS and their success in college (McCallen & Johnson, 2020). The role of a college counselor could lend itself as an ideal mentor and support for FGS (Martinez, 2021). Some literature suggests that there is a need for more inclusive college campus environments to ensure success for students from diverse backgrounds (Phillips et al., 2020). As a member of the college campus community, a college counselor can help construct an equitable and inclusive environment in direct counseling as well as outside of the office. Examples of interventions applicable to counselors in a direct counseling setting could be creating a safe space in their own office, expanding access to services, and keeping up to date with knowledge about FGS's barriers, programs, scholarships, and resources. Counselors may take on advocacy roles outside of the office, for example, counselors may use their position to present and psychoeducate students, faculty, and community members about first-generation challenges. Connecting with students while in a presentation or

psychoeducation setting can be a good way for counselors to understand the specific needs of their university. This can also be a way for students to meet counselors and know of campus counseling as a resource for diverse needs.

In addition, counselors can start groups based on the needs of their clients. A group for FGS could be an opportunity for students to connect with others in their same position. The counselor facilitating the group could help students identify common barriers and help instill universality so that students do not feel so alone in their challenges. Resources that may have been beneficial for one student could be shared with the group, since it has been shown that FGS seek help through networks they trust (Payne et al., 2021). Family achievement guilt can be another topic of discussion within the group. A focus of the group could be identifying strengths and how the student, or group of students, have faced adversity but still exhibit resilience. Another topic of discussion could be the students' motivations for earning a college degree. A group can help facilitate a safe space for students who may not feel like they fit in. A college counselor can use their advocacy competencies to support these students and aid in their success for graduation and beyond.

Author's Note

It is so wonderful to be at this point in my own educational journey. When I was 16, I was referred to a psychologist for the very first time after months of feeling what I *thought* was "physical sickness." I had no idea about mental health, or that what I was experiencing was mental health related. This interaction changed my life because that day I felt like I was not alone, I finally had clarity and some answers. Since then, I have been committed to bringing awareness about mental health to others and working on fulfilling my dream to become a counselor and advocate for social justice issues. I would like to thank all my unofficial mentors in higher education for all their support, guidance, advice-giving, and warmth. I would not be at this point without the help of others. As a future counselor, I would like to use my skills to help advocate for students who may have a lot going against them. Although I am not a first-generation student myself, I know what it feels like to be lost or unsupported in such a pivotal part of one's life. I look forward to many more years of learning, advocating, and being in the mental health profession.

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